



Center Stage Catering

John Schopp's personal touch has created demand for his services at SML

STORY BY FERNE HALE • PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICAH GAUDIO

Some parties you can handle on your own. Others call for a professional. For discriminating lake-area residents and businesses, that call often goes out to Center Stage Catering. Owned and operated by Chef John Schopp, the Rocky Mount-based business has seen its client base at the Smith Mountain Lake grow significantly over the past few years.

"We love catering at the lake because it's a beautiful setting - a stunning backdrop for our food. Because every site is different, our presentations vary accordingly. Working there

is very fulfilling creatively," said Schopp, whose web site touts his business as "providing the very finest cuisine in the Blue Ridge."

The business even has food groupies.

"When party guests arrive, they often detour from the path to the house when they see our truck, to say, 'Wow, we're so glad you're doing the food tonight,'" Schopp said.

Lake resident and event consultant Wendy Moore said, "At some events, when you see the food, you know who did the catering. Not so with Center Stage which makes everything unique."

Versatility and individuality are the hallmarks of Center

◀ John and Karen Schopp own and operate Center Stage Catering and Edible Vibe, a cafe and coffee house in downtown Rocky Mount.



Center Stage Catering, CONTINUED

Stage Catering. As an example, Schopp cited a wedding reception with traditional Bolivian food. Another special event included caviar, foie gras, crab and European cheeses. A Florida couple raved that Schopp's Cuban cuisine for their party was better than anything they had eaten in Miami.

While in the early party planning stages, Schopp sits down personally with each client and asks about favorite flavors, favorite restaurants and how the client wants the event to feel. "An event should be more than just food; it should say something about the people hosting it," he said, noting that he uses no set menus, customizing everything.

"I'm not comfortable entertaining a big group," said Nancy Yost, who used Center Stage to cater a lakefront party last summer. "John and his crew made everything so easy for us that I enjoyed the party as much as our guests did. And his innovative food ideas fit our style to a 'T'."

The Yosts' party featured a down-home theme and included, among many menu items, fried green tomatoes, carved pork loin, and mini mason jars with layers of baked beans, smoked barbeque and creamy cole slaw with a corn stick standing up in the center.

Schopp emphasized the freshness of his food, which is all prepared on site; the catering truck has ovens, and grill stations are set up to cook meats, seafood or vegetables. He often turns the homeowner's garage into a staging area. Produce comes fresh from three local farmers. Everything served is made from scratch, including the stock, pastry, chips, even crackers.

How did Schopp, with a bachelor of business administration degree from the University of Kentucky, end up in the catering business?

"I knew I wanted to be a chef since I was seven," he said. "I found good teachers and apprenticed in a French restaurant. I not only worked there, I went there on days off."

For the next 16 years he worked in the private club industry as executive chef, pastry chef, and food and beverage director – a position he held at Hunting Hills Country Club in Roanoke. He later worked for a company that provided backstage catering services to musicians. Because his work received rave reviews,

Roanoke Civic Center officials hired him to handle all of their catering.

In 2001, Schopp founded Center Stage Catering which, in addition to furnishing elegant food for individual and business events, provides catering services for the Jefferson Center, a performing arts venue and meeting facility in Roanoke. The Center Stage web site is filled with celebrity testimonials from artists such as Wynton Marsalis and Kenny Chesney. Schopp said he has been asked by several musicians to join them on the road.

"KISS asked us to finish out the tour with them," Schopp said.

Though he majored in marketing, Schopp said he has to do very little of it for Center Stage.

"We perpetuate our business by the guests asking, 'Who did the food?'" he said.

Guests do ask, and clients do rave. Nancy and Charlie Marshall had Center Stage cater their lakeside 50th anniversary party for 100 people in June.

"They did a fantastic job," said Nancy Marshall. "The food was outstanding and the service impeccable. Nothing was too much for them to do, and they're awfully nice people to deal with."

In 2004, Schopp and his wife Karen, a landscape architect turned business partner, opened Edible Vibe in downtown Rocky Mount.

"Our hearts go into both businesses," she said. "The café/ coffee house offers delicious made-on-the-premises pastries, tapas, soups, salads, sandwiches, and on Thursday and Friday evening hot specials."

John Schopp added, "There's a passion to it. Food is like a game. It's all about timing – the unfolding of about 300 details – and everything must be perfect."

Edible Vibe is located at 315 Franklin Street in Rocky Mount and is open Monday through Wednesday 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., Thursday and Friday 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. with free live music, and Saturday 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. For more information on either business, call 540.489.7827 or visit centerstagefood.com.

